THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY AS FOUND IN JAMES PURDY'S FIRST FIVE NOVELS: MALCOLM, EUSTACE CHISHOLM AND THE WORKS, JEREMY'S VERSION, THE NEPHEW, AND CABOT WRIGHT BEGINS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Who am I? What am I? What can I do? These are all questions a young person must answer. At least they are questions the young people of the 1960's and 1970's have had placed before them daily. The establishment of some identity seems to be mandatory, or at least a prerequisite, to the emergence of a man or a woman. The questions seem simple enough, but somehow the answers do not seem to be so easy to find. Maybe that is why so many writers, psychologists and sociologists have written and lectured on the subject of identity in an attempt to set up guidelines to aid the individual in his quest. The problem seems to be so great because of the complexity in the make up of an individual. An individual is a physical being who has wants and needs which must be supplied. This being seems to be basic. This physical being finds itself through an assimilation of sense data and reason in a world of other physical beings which have wants and needs which must be supplied. The problem becomes more and more complex for the physical being as it comes into more and more contact with others. Thus, how the individual is to satisfy himself and relate to others who are trying to satisfy themselves becomes the question. He must do both, whether he wants to or not. He has no choice. What is

identity then: the physical being; the lone individual; how he sees himself; how others see him; how he relates to others?

James Purdy is a contemporary writer who has chosen to write about identity. He has pictured identity and the problems individuals have in defining and realizing identity in a most real and complex way. The complexity seems to lie in a constant tension between individual freedom (freedom being defined as a being operating as he wants and needs to) and the fact that there are other beings in the world. Another way of stating the same problem is that there seems to be a constant tension between the way one sees himself or wants to see himself, and the ability he has to make himself "be" or "be seen" as he himself is. This tension comes from others around him, in that they affect his choices by their presence, and their need of identity establishment, or by their perceptions of him.

Purdy's five novels Malcolm, The Nephew, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, Cabot Wright Begins, and Jeremy's Version present the question of identity, in that all of the main characters are in a quest for identity. The complexity of this quest is emphasized in each novel, probably the most thoroughly in his last, Jeremy's Version. This complexity, however, is more easily seen when one realizes that the novels fall into two distinct categories insofar as the presentation of the subject identity is concerned. One of these categories is the seeking for wanted identity by an individual and yet

failure in this seeking because someone else always affected his life, even though he would have failed with freedom, because someone else is necessary for identity to be developed. These three novels are Malcolm, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, and Jeremy's Version. In each of these novels, a major character or minor characters seek an identity. They find that this quest cannot be accomplished without the presence of others. They must relate with other beings before they can establish any kind of an identity, and yet each character finds that he cannot become what he wants to become because of others. The second group of novels consists of the other two novels Cabot Wright Begins and The Nephew. Here, the main characters are seen through the eyes of others. How the characters are seen is as much a part of their identity as what they are, because the character finds that he must be at least part of how he is seen. In the novels of James Purdy a quest for identity is presented; the understanding of the quest acquires complexity with the recognition of identity. Purdy seems to feel that identity is a finding of a synthesis between the individual and society, between how one sees himself and how others see him, and how he is allowed to be because of others.[1]

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[1]The interesting point in the problem stated above is that when one turns to psychology, he finds identity defined by a more scientific, rational approach to the individual world than one is liable to find from a novelist's viewpoint. One finds Erik Erikson defining ego identity as "an interaction

In preparing this discussion of the theme of identity as found in Purdy's novels, the scholarly works pertaining to Purdy were surveyed. The bibliographies surveyed were the PMLA Bibliography, the Social Sciences and Humanities Index, and the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, from 1957 to the present (1957 being the year his first novel was published). The books read for background material were City of Words, Tony Tanner; Waiting For the End, Leslie A. Fiedler; Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel, Ihab Hassan; Childhood and Society, Erik Erikson; Identity, Youth and Crisis, Erik Erikson; and Faces People Wear, Charles DiSalvo.

Nothing was found concerning the role of identity in Purdy's works in any of the material mentioned above.

The discussion which follows consists of three more chapters. In Chapter 2, "The Individual Quest for Identity," a discussion of the novels Malcolm, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, and Jeremy's Version is presented. The novels are

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of the id and the super ego." Is this not similar to what Purdy has said? One must realize that Erikson is not mentioned to prove Purdy, or that Purdy was read from Erikson's point of view. As a matter of fact, Purdy was read and categorized before Erikson's definition was discovered. Erikson is only mentioned because he is considered to be a leading authority on the subject of identity, and since one seems to view identity as a psychological problem--how psychology sees identity would have some bearing on the problem. Whatever, the point is that Erikson is only mentioned to show that he views a tension between forces quite similar to those stated by Purdy as the essential problem in identification. Erikson is certainly not the govenor of this discussion, he is only the collaborator. Purdy is the govenor as one will see later.

looked at individually in order to see the individual quest for identity that is presented in each novel.

In Chapter 3, "The Public Quest For Identity," a discussion of the novels The Nephew and Cabot Wright Begins is presented. These novels are looked at individually in order to see how Purdy presents a public quest for identity.

In Chapter 4, "Conclusion," the second and third chapters are summarized with the major points being re-stated, but more importantly, the conclusion reached from this study of identity in the novels of James Purdy will be presented.

Chapter 2

THE INDIVIDUAL QUEST FOR IDENTITY

The first division of James Purdy's novels consists of Malcolm, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, and Jeremy's Version. These are the novels which present an individual's quest for his own identity. The other two novels, The Nephew and Cabot Wright Begins, present outsiders or others trying to establish someone else's rather than their own identity. In his quest for identity the individual becomes conscious of that "vicious circle," that "irony" which modern literature seems to always possess in a portrayal of life. The individuals want to become, and yet they cannot. They want to become something, sometimes anything, for they are not satisfied with their present being. In other words, each of the characters presents a degree of hope or vision in that they want to change. Recognition is soon made that this becoming, this realization of their vision, can only happen in the mind, which does not satisfy the character, or in, or through an interplay (interaction) with others, and yet, in the movement from the mind to society, something is lost. What is lost is "freedom" which the mind seems only to possess. In the mind nothing is hindered; in the world many if not all things are hindered because the individual finds dreams trying to be made tangible. What

springs up then is a longing, a desire, almost a haunting, driving need to try and realize what the mind can conceive, because only in something tangible can a satisfying of this urge be found, and yet the impossible is attempted. The very fact that the concept must be more than conceived, that it must be realized, keeps this realization from happening. In one of his statements Sartre describes man as a "useless passion;"[2] in these novels Purdy presents man as a useless passion.

Perhaps a look at the novels and the stories involved will help focus what has been said. Purdy's first novel, Malcolm, is an ideal place to begin. In Malcolm is found said everything Purdy says later, but so simply stated as to be almost overlooked.

Malcolm is a boy of about fifteen years of age. He is extraordinarily handsome, strong physically, yet weak mentally with an openness and benign acceptance of everything. That is, he has no clear idea of what to do. The novel opens with Malcolm sitting on a bench in front of the hotel where he lives. He seemingly "belongs nowhere and to nobody." He is only sitting there with "an elegant and untouched appearance." One day Professor Cox, an astrologer who passes the hotel daily, decides to talk to Malcolm. The Professor speaks to Malcolm, but Malcolm thinks that the Professor is

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[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, An Essay On Phenomenological Ontology, trans. by Haze E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 615.

talking to the bench, evidently believing he and the bench possess many of the same qualities. When the Professor asks, "Who are you?" Malcolm answers, "My name is Malcolm."[3] There is no hint of an "I am Malcolm." Malcolm is only a name, not a person, not an individual, only a name.

A short discussion with Malcolm reveals that he has been sitting on the bench waiting for his father to return. His father is a wealthy man who seemingly does nothing but care for Malcolm and travel. In his caring for Malcolm, he has done everything; Malcolm has done nothing, so that with the father gone, Malcolm can do nothing but sit on the bench and wait for the father's return. Needless to say, the Professor is somewhat disgruntled by Malcolm. Here is a boy of fifteen who can do nothing, who is nothing without his father. Malcolm only sits on the bench and waits for his father's return.

The Professor tells Malcolm he must "do" something about his situation. The word "do" shocks and surprises Malcolm, but not nearly so much as what must be done. Malcolm must "give himself up to things." Malcolm then asks if he can go home with Mr. Cox, which of course is out of the question because Malcolm is only seeking shelter; and now Malcolm himself must "do." What Professor Cox does do for Malcolm is give him addresses. He gives Malcolm people

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[3]James Purdy, Malcolm (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1959), p. 3.

acquaintances. Malcolm will now become a part of society, and in doing this Malcolm will become something besides a name, or his father's shadow. Now Malcolm becomes somebody, a person, a personality. Is Purdy then saying that without interaction, without society, one is nothing more than a name, a Malcolm who is not able to differentiate himself from a bench? Certainly one cannot say yet, but for Malcolm to become Malcolm he had to leave the bench, he had to find society. The frightening part, and maybe the ironical part is that the first address Malcolm receives is that of an undertaker. Is death in life? Or, is death the result of life? One cannot answer with assurance these questions Purdy always seems to be putting before one, but the questions always leave one the same result, a want to answer something which seems so essential to life but for which there is no answer unless Malcolm is an answer. In the addresses Malcolm seemingly finds an answer.

Malcolm's list of addresses is composed of Estel Blanc, the undertaker; Kermit and Laureen, a married couple with Kermit being a midget artist, and Laureen, "a stout young blonde;" Madame Girard, the wife of the magnate who wants to adopt Malcolm, and the lady who puts into words Purdy's quest for identity; and Eloisa and Jerome Brace, another artist and her husband. By making visits to each of these people's homes, Malcolm is initiated into society, and into Malcolm.

Seemingly, if Malcolm is only able to establish or

acquire an identity through contact with others, would not the others also be establishing, or acquiring, an identity through contact with Malcolm? For the sake of consistency, if for no other reason, one would think so, and this phenomenon is found to be present in Purdy. Account is given to the need of socialization with the minor characters also being caught up in the quest for identity. A look at some of these minor characters reveals the significance of social contacts.

The first minor character to be looked at is Kermit, the midget artist who is married to Laureen. Kermit and Laureen are Malcolm's second address. Their marriage certainly leaves something to be desired, but no doubt is left that their marriage is necessary for the moment. Kermit is a midget, yet he will not admit this fact. He is a small man, and only the wrath of God could possibly be greater than the wrath he is able to exhibit when he has been called a midget. Malcolm makes the mistake of asking Kermit if he was a "dwarf or a midget," to which Kermit answers "No!" emphatically."[4] Malcolm argues that he must be one or the other because he has seen men like him in the circuses, and they were either one or the other. Kermit answers, "Not like me. . . . You've seen nobody like me."[5] The point of course is that Kermit is a midget, anyone can see Kermit is a midget, but he

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[4]Ibid., p. 32.

[5]Ibid.

will not believe the fact or see that he is a midget. Contact with Malcolm later causes Kermit to admit that he is a midget, that he does differ from others. Until Malcolm, nobody has told Kermit what he is. Kermit is more explicit in his portrayal of the need for contact before identity can be established than is Malcolm.

When Malcolm first arrives at Kermit's house, the initial conversation centers around Professor Cox, and the common bond among the three people Malcolm, Kermit and Laureen. Malcolm says that he feels that the Professor does not believe what he has told him about his father. Kermit answers, "Oh, he probably believed you; he only wanted to test your belief. To make you talk. . ."[6] as if Malcolm's beliefs and thoughts were not viable, were worthless unless some kind of interaction, some kind of communication with others had taken place. This need for society is why Malcolm had to answer a question about himself with the words, "You see there is nothing to hear about in my case. I am, well, as they say, a cypher and a blank."[7] Malcolm has never been in society, he has never talked with anyone other than his father, he has never done anything other than what his father has told him to do. The only subject Malcolm could possibly talk about is his father; Malcolm is, as he said, only a name. The implication that name is insufficient for identity is

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[6]Ibid., p. 31.

[7]Ibid., p. 29.

given emphasis with the entry of Madame Girard.

Madame Girard seems to be the typical Purdy female character. She is a strong woman--domineering, possessive, always needing to be the center of attention. Her husband, Girard Girard, is one of the wealthiest men in the world, feared throughout the business world for his hard, cold, bold tactics which he uses on everyone but his wife. She rules him. She is Madame Girard, the "woman" in the world.

The Girards seem to be getting along fairly well until Malcolm enters the picture. They accept each other's actions, but with Malcolm comes the beginning of Madame Girard's downfall, and Girard Girard's redemption. Madame Girard finds in Malcolm something she cannot buy, she cannot control. Malcolm, even though he still has no established identity, recognizes that he is someone who cannot be possessed. Madame Girard tries to possess him, but she cannot succeed. She appeals to her husband, who, since he always solves his problems with his money, tries to talk Malcolm into letting them adopt him. Malcolm will not go to the Girard's without Kermit, and Kermit will not go under any circumstances (again one sees how society affects one's decision). Because of Madame Girard's incessant driving of Girard Girard to possess Malcolm and Malcolm's firm refusals, Girard Girard decides to leave his wife. No longer does he love her. His love has been fading since his proposals to Madame Girard when she had said, "From

now on the victories are to be my own."[8]

Girard Girard needed interaction, something which he had not found with his wife since all the victories were to be hers. In Malcolm he saw someone who could stand against her, who changed her life as well as having his life changed by her. Girard Girard left for another woman, curiously enough Kermit's wife, the reason being explained by Madame Girard herself:

> Her eyes fell on the intense gold letters of his identification, seeing perhaps then her own identity melting away into the letters of his name. . .
> "You remember, your victories were all to be your own, (he recalled the lagoon for her). . ."
> "You are free to do what you can and what you must. . ."
> "I will always be Madame Girard. A command from you cannot destroy my identity. . ."
> "Without my name, without your fortune. . . But my name, I am known everywhere as Madame Girard."
> "Your name must be taken from you. Has already been taken."
> "You mean to destroy my identity, then?"
> "Your friends, your young men, will come to see what is you. Your pure victory, as you have always called it, is now. You are completely free--can't you see?"[9]

Only now, Madame Girard is nothing. The desire for freedom, the giving of freedom, and the reception of freedom have cost Madame Girard her identity. The identity lost was only that of a name, but the name lost belonged to a person, to Girard, with whom Madame Girard became Madame Girard. She knows this to be true, and thus we see the fear and

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[8]Ibid., p. 147.

[9]Ibid.

regret at his leaving. However, Madame Girard remained Madame Girard throughout the world, her influence was not lost, she was more than just him, but she knew, for he had proved it to her, that without him she would not, she could not have become Madame Girard.

Of course, there is much more to the novel than has been told, but the discussion has been concerned with the quest for identity found in the novel, Malcolm. There is certainly a quest on the part of Malcolm. He is nothing, or at least knows himself to be nothing, yet he becomes someone. Every person he comes into contact with is affected by him. He marries. Malcolm becomes more than a "blank and a cypher;" he leaves a manuscript of over 300 words depicting his life, when before he had nothing to say about himself. Malcolm came about because of interaction with others. Without them he was a name, with them he became a person. Yet, one realizes Malcolm lost his personal freedom to become Malcolm. Kermit probably said it best when he told Malcolm, "You are merely free to be what you have to be."[10]

Kermit's statement can be better explained with a look at the novel, Eustace Chisholm and the Works. Eustace Chisholm and the Works is a love story that is sad, cruel and touching, but also perverse and raw. The novel

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[10]Ibid., p.26.

is a story of love between two men, and what the love does to the men. Neither man sees himself as a homosexual. Neither man wants to be a homosexual, and yet they are in love with each other, a fact which allows neither man happiness or a sense of identity. They are both only "free to be what they have to be."

The two men who are in love with each other are Daniel Haws and Amos Ratcliffe. Daniel is a huge, hulking man, a coal miner from southern Illinois. Daniel believes himself to be all man, and he has to keep going to the block prostitute, Maureen O'Dell, to prove himself a man. He is twenty-five years old, and he owns the apartment building in which Amos lives. Daniel will in no way tell Amos of his love, and Amos would never know that Daniel loves him, except that Daniel sleepwalks. Every night he comes into Amos' room and takes Amos' head into his arms telling him to promise he will stay. Of course, Daniel knows nothing of these actions he performs.

Amos is a young intellectual who has lost his scholarship at the university. He lives from hand to mouth. He knows little about homosexuality, and what he does know frightens him, yet he cannot rid himself of a growing attachment to Daniel. He is afraid to tell Daniel of his sleepwalking because Daniel will certainly kill him, at least beat him severely, trying to exhibit his manliness. Amos, himself, does not want to love Daniel, and yet he cannot leave Daniel's presence.

Eustace Chisholm is the center man in the novel; around him all the other characters revolve. He is a student of Amos' and a writer. Eustace is a useless human being when measured by any set of values considered positive in our society and by the other characters in the novel, yet he realizes and accepts what he is, so the other characters are forced to come to him for advice. Eustace's value will be shown later when he is found in the job of confidant and intermediary for both Amos and Daniel.

As was stated earlier, Daniel loved Amos but would not, could not, admit this fact. He would rather have gone back to the army and suffer the horrible tortures he later had to suffer. Daniel would run before he would admit he loved Amos. He had to run:

> Unable to take his eyes off the boy's face, he could not admit that the feeling which seized him was love--he regarded it as some physical illness at first. Indeed, from the first beginning and hint of his manhood he had always had girls, had passed for girl-crazy in his family, and had continued his fornications like a good soldier until the present with habitual tireless regularity. He could not feel he wanted the body of Amos (who was a thin boy, though his buttocks had beautiful shape), but he could not deny to himself in his hours of blinding self-revelation that he needed Amos, that it was Amos who dictated everything he felt and represented all he needed. That his whole being was now taken up with a mere boy was simply the last of a long series of disasters which had been his life.[11]

Thus, he left his apartments and went back to the army. Daniel had been a soldier once under another name,

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[11] James Purdy, Eustace Chisholm and the Works (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1967), p. 73.

hated the army, and left. Now he ran back, enlisted under his real name, and found hell. The point is, he went back to something he hated and had left to keep from admitting that he loved Amos. Here was a man who did not want to be a homosexual, but who, because of another person, could not be what he wanted. In freedom Daniel found nothing, in society he found Amos, but he could not have him, because he could not accept himself as a homosexual.

In the army Daniel finds more hell than any Christian can depict for the worst sinner. Daniel has a captain, Captain Stadger, who finds out that Daniel sleepwalks, who finds out that Daniel loves Amos, and who uses some of the most perverse tortures a man could devise. He beats Daniel. He humiliates Daniel. Daniel takes everything. Finally, Stadger decides to castrate Daniel. Stadger's service goes like this:

> Quickly, like a man working fast to save a sinking ship, Stadger stripped the enlisted man of the last of his clothing, tied him with the special wire to the tree. Daniel sighed vociferously. He had waited for death so long, he was almost already at peace, and the look of satisfaction on the soldiers' face removed any last fear or compunction the captain may have had of elements, man, God.
>
> "Tell me what I'm going to do to you?" Captain Stadger asked. . .
>
> "Kill me. . ." Daniel answered.
>
> The captain struck him viciously again and again, and the queer sound as of bone breaking was faintly audible through the uproar of the tropical storm.
>
> "Don't command me, you fucker," the captain's voice rose.
>
> Then he repeated his question, "What am I going to do to you?"
>
> "Have power," Daniel mumbled. . .
>
> "How did you show Amos your love?" Captain Stadger's

> voice came like the thunder behind them, while with pitiless savagery he held open the mutilated man's eyelids.
>
> "I never gave him love," the soldier said. "I failed him as I failed myself."
>
> Pulling out of his pocket a photograph of the dead boy, Captain Stadger thrust it in front of the soldier.
>
> "Prefer me to him now, and you're free, Haws."
>
> When Daniel did not reply, he raised one blow after another upon his prisoner until the back of the tree ran red.
>
> Leaving the soldier for a few moments then, he returned with the weapon he had shown him a short while before.
>
> A pink sheet of lightning illuminated the weapon's sharp edges and the captain without a word more began his work, pushing like flame with the instrument into Daniel's groin upward and over, and then when it's work was nearing completion he put his face to Daniel's and pressing said something, in bloody accolade, that not even Daniel heard.[12]

That was not the first, but the last, punishment Daniel had to suffer at the hands of Captain Stadger, and he suffered this torture simply because he was not what he wanted to be, and he could not be what he was. His love for Amos frightened him so that he could not love Amos, and yet Daniel could not forget Amos, or live without him, thus leaving himself to nothing but torture.

The plight of Amos was just as sad, maybe just as perverse, if not as cruel. Amos seemed destined, at least he was driven, to dependence on Reuben Masterson, a millionaire who knew not what or whom he loved. Amos hated this life of dependence upon Masterson that he was leading, nor did he want to continue it. He was forced, however, to live this life because of his love for Daniel. He could love

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[12]Ibid., p. 206.

no other person but Daniel, and he could not love Daniel because of Daniel. Amos too, was not what he wanted to be, and could not be what he wanted to be.

One can see that without having known each other, Amos and Daniel were nothing; Daniel said his life was nothing but "disaster," yet because of their having known each other they reaped nothing but punishment. Only by their interacting was their identity found, or formed, and yet this same interaction destroyed them. Their quest for identity was found in interaction with others for they did not exist alone, and yet this same interaction destroyed them.

The last novel to be discussed in the category of the individual quest for identity is Jeremy's Version, Purdy's latest and most complex novel. Typically Purdy in theme, Jeremy's Version is different from his other novels in that it is much more conventional in style and story. The complexity of the world that the characters are forced into is so overwhelming, one wonders how the characters are able to act, and yet one soon realizes that their world is the same world surrounding the reader, and if he wants the character to act, he must be able to act himself.

The major character is Elvira Summerlad Fergus. She is the mother of three boys, two of whom are also major characters, Rick and Jethro. Her husband, Wilders Fergus, is also of primary importance to the novel, even though he has a small role in the novel's action. Elvira is a strong, beautiful woman. She is self-assured, possessive

and watchful against being controlled. Her personal freedoms, and her divorce from her straying husband, soon control her actions.

Wilders, her husband, was a promising young banker when they were married, but soon he lost everything he had, what his family had, and what her family had. He took to the road then, trying to acquire another fortune in any way possible but met with no success. Elvira is left to care for the children. She manages somehow (a doctor friend gives her the money) to acquire a large house, which she makes into a boarding house. In this way her children have a roof over their heads, and food to eat. Of course, this meager success she finds, combined with contempt for her husband's misfortune and seemingly cowardly actions, creates an abundance of independence in her. She is proud that she has done better than her husband, and she wants to be completely free. She wants a divorce, for she and Wilders have not lived together for years, but she still has his name, a thing which she does not want.

Her oldest son, Rick, is a sensitive, somewhat effeminate young man who wants to be in the movies. Only one thing keeps him from going to New York and success: he cannot leave his mother. He loves her, as most people love their mother, but because of Elvira's possessiveness he cannot be free. He keeps saying he will only obey his mother's wishes this one more time, and then he will be free, but he never leaves. He cannot live with his mother; that is,

he cannot become an actor at home with her, but he cannot leave her either.

Jethro, the middle son, and the one through whose eyes the events are seen (from a diary that he keeps), is a sickly child, barely escaping death at the age of six. Jethro, too, is a sensitive child, but one whose sensitivities have almost become warped to the point that everything becomes morbid and violent to the young man. He is wounded by his father's violence and his mother's whoredom to the point that he feels he must kill his mother. He even tries.

The divorce, then, becomes the prominent issue in each character's life. Elvira will receive the freedom she wants; Rick feels that if he testifies for his mother he, too, will be free; Jethro loves his mother, but he also finds that he loves his father; and, Wilders will have lost everything he ever possessed when he loses his family. The divorce is the center of the story, as well as the focal point in each character's quest for identity. One sees the word freedom appear as in Malcolm; one sees the word love appear as in Eustace Chisholm and the Works; and inherent in both freedom and love is a concept of interaction or socialization, whether they be positive or negative. A look at the characters in terms of their quests reveals this point.

Elvira wants the divorce most of all. As a matter of fact, she is the only member of the family who wants the divorce. Elvira feels that with a divorce she would find freedom, and with freedom she would become Elvira Summerlad,

an independent person, for with freedom comes everything and anything. What Elvira receives with the divorce is freedom, but the gifts of freedom are not as she expects. The results of Elvira's quest can be seen in her thoughts after the divorce:

> As on those days when her "time of the month" came unexpectedly after an emotional upset, Elvira now kept close to the confines of the isolated room, but depressed this time with the fear that the very apex of her heart was about to burst. Then came a tempest of tears harsher and more full of gall than any flow of blood from heart or womb. She stood in the buttery, her rings coming loose from her fingers from the soapsuds on her hands, weeping. The divorce, which once granted, was to have ushered in freedom was now, she saw, only a herald of a kind of nothingness which she had never before experienced or dreamed was in store for any human heart, least of all her own. And she had promised herself that once she was free she would "celebrate" in an outing and picnic supper in the fairgrounds! She had thought, she now looked backward, that once the decree was granted in her favor, she and her boys would live on together in an ever-deepening happiness and content. She had never considered squarely until now that boys changed into men and are in due time gone forever, and her boys appeared more eager to leave her than any young one she had ever met. . . .The wonderful and terrible years she had had with her three boys, her real, her overwhelming life--all, all was coming to an end, and with it, their daily "banquets" over which they had laughed and talked, quarreled, insulted one another, confided what joy and sorrow they could claim, this would be over, the big house empty of all voices except perhaps those of strangers, who, in the gloom of her coming childlessness, would in quick time desert her also.[13]

In the acquisition of freedom, she had lost her "real life." Elvira had not been able to find a synthesis between the wants of the self and the wants of society, and because of this, because of her desire for freedom, her life

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[13]James Purdy, Jeremy's Version (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1970), pp. 251-52.

became nothingness until at the end of the novel one finds her sending Jethro away with these words:

> "I've lost everything, Jeth. . .The boarding house is up for sale to pay all my debts, and your older brother has gone to New York to try to make a name for himself and has left for good. . ."
> "Mother has no choice, I'm afraid, but to marry again. . ."[14]

In Rick freedom is used more positively but still with unhappy consequences. Throughout the book Rick tells his mother he will aid her one more time, but then he is leaving. This he finally does through the divorce proceedings. The drama of the divorce trial and the pressure issuing from having to testify against his father, whom he loves even though he dislikes everything he has done for his family, is so great that Rick says to his mother:

> "For once I've testified against your husband, I'll be free of you, so engrave it in your memory. I'll be free and go my own way, you tiger bitch, free of your damned plans, wiles and bondage. Yes, tell all the God-damned world I'll testify against your husband and then I'll break, in view of everybody, the fetters you've forged for me. . ."[15]

After the trial he goes to New York, he becomes an actor, and yet his freedom costs him the love of his mother, and his love for her, for before he could be free he had to break the bond of love which was partially if not entirely what he was bound by. Freedom aids Rick; but only because Rick has extreme interactions. He has no self, or a self limited to his mother, just as Malcolm

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[14]Ibid., p. 274.

[15]Ibid., p. 219.

had been limited to his father. Freedom aids Rick, hinders Elvira and forsakes Jethro. Jethro realizes, because of the divorce proceedings, that he loves his father, that his father is a man he can respect, and that no matter how much he loves his mother, and he loves her dearly, he cannot hate his father for her. The divorce proceedings then become nothing but torture and true separation for Jethro. Before, his father was only gone; now, his father is no more. Of course, after he attempts to kill his mother, he goes to live with his father, but this does not please him, because he loves his mother so much. Jethro does not want freedom, he wants a father and a mother, a family, a society. His injury has made him so alone that he seeks society, for in society he knows is love, and in love will be security and identity.

The divorce was what made Jethro realize that he loved his father, yet other reasons kept Jethro from having a father. He had seemed fairly satisfied before the divorce started, but when his father came back, when the trial started, Jethro found a father:

> He was walking with a man he had never known before, and someone who was clothed, it seemed, only in blood, and the stain of vegetation and earth, but at the same time he felt the person beside him was someone he had always been meant to know, and who in turn knew him, and that they were meant to be with each other as they were now, and the very stench of the blood and the red drops which fell staining the ground as they walked confirmed the feeling.[16]

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[16] Ibid., p. 202.

Yet, Jethro was not allowed this father because of other people, because his mother wanted freedom, because his father was a loser, always looking backwards; but Jethro would not have a father. Jethro could not realize his wishes, his dreams, his quest. What Jethro did realize was an intense desire to die.

Jeremy's Version, then, shows the complexity one finds in establishing one's identity in his own world. There is the desire for freedom, for independence, and yet this can destroy one's identity; there is a desire for interaction and yet this destroys identity if allowed to turn to dependency, and there is the desire for both personal freedom and interaction, which ends only in a death wish, because of the precariousness of the balance which must be made. One must have people, and yet people destroy.

This first category of novels relating to identity demonstrates that there is definitely a need for others. This point was quite evident in Malcolm when Malcolm only became something besides a name after he had met and interacted with others.

In Eustace Chisholm and the Works Amos and Daniel became Amos and Daniel only after they had met each other; before they were nothing. And, in Jeremy's Version the acts each character performed were only in response to another or dependent upon the reactions of another person.

Chapter 3

THE PUBLIC QUEST FOR IDENTITY

The second category is composed of Purdy's shortest novel, The Nephew, and Cabot Wright Begins. These two novels were not classed separately because they failed to deal with the theme of identity, but rather because of how they dealt with identity. These novels discuss identity from another's eyes. When the person whose identity is being sought appears as an active character instead of a subject of research of the other characters, the character finds he cannot be what he is because of the way in which he is viewed, and said to be, by others. A closer look at the novels should help clarify what is trying to be said.

The Nephew, Purdy's second novel, is short but written in a memorable way. The story is about life in a small town with the time being from one Memorial Day to the next. The major characters are Alma and Boyd Mason, brother and sister and both un-married. Alma is a retired school teacher; Boyd is a semi-retired real estate broker. The nephew alluded to by the title is theirs, Cliff.

Cliff has been lost in action in the Korean Conflict. Alma will not believe he is dead. She will not accept the fact. As time passes though, her fear that he may be dead grows. Of course, then, his memory begins to prey on her

mind. Finally she decides to write a memorial to Cliff, the only problem being that she cannot write a word. She finds that she does not know what to say. Here was a boy who lived half his life with her, and she remembers nothing to say about him. The sad part is that Alma wanted to write one thing, but Cliff was another. She had in her mind what she wanted to say, but she could not present her ideas in connection with Cliff, so she begins a fact-finding adventure to give validity to her story:

> Shortly after Alma had purchased the record book only to find that she could not put pen to its paper, a person went by her house who, she felt instinctively, might hold the key to her problem, and from whom a word or suggestion could unlock in herself all the things which she wished to write down about Cliff.[1]

The person who passes her house is Professor Mannheim, a professor of Cliff's. Cliff had gone to the local university a little over a year before he joined the army. Of course, Alma thinks that Cliff was an excellent student, but the Professor says,

> "I believe there was something about Cliff that might have proved exceptional. . . ."
> "But it had not developed, you see," he sighed.[2]

Alma is now definitely aware that what she saw in Cliff was not the real Cliff, and yet she cannot deny her memories. Alma cannot give up; she is driven to complete

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[1]James Purdy, The Nephew (New York: Avon Books, 1960), p. 36.

[2]Ibid., p. 90.

a memorial. By accident she finds out that Cliff knew and was friends with Willard Baker and his roommate Vernon.

Willard is the rich town drunk. Vernon had been Willard's guest, and there are rumors that they are homosexuals, rumors which are fairly well founded. Of course, one can imagine poor Alma when she finds out that Vernon and Willard were friends of Cliff's. The most shocking event comes when Willard and Vernon are gone for a few weeks, and Vernon's room catches on fire. Alma rushes into the room (the house was next door), only to find herself staring face-to-face at a wall-size picture of Cliff. What this picture must mean causes Alma to shudder when she thinks of it.

Now, though, Alma receives a letter saying Cliff is most assuredly dead, there is no hope. Alma forgets her memorial, and she and Boyd continue their humdrum existence, wiser in that they were awakened to the fact that what one sees can be colored by what one wants to see. In the novel one finds Alma waiting to write about the nephew she raised, the "all American boy." Yet, she finds that Cliff is not as she saw or remembered him, yet one must believe that the Cliff she knew was as real to her as any Cliff she encounters in her detective work.

What is left is uncertainty; uncertainty as to who or what Cliff really was, because of the uncertainty as to the validity of Alma's perceptions of Cliff, or for that matter the uncertainty as to the validity of anyone's

perception. Cliff holds the answer, and Cliff is not present. Denial of these perceptions, denial of a Cliff as others viewed him, however, is also impossible. Left with certainty that denial is impossible and affirmation is impossible, or an idea of the uncertainty formed in public identity, Cabot Wright Begins is turned to for a look at the portrayal of public identity versus the living individual.

Cabot Wright Begins is a story of Cabot Wright. Cabot is reported to be well-educated, a young man (Yale man) who is on his way up in life. He is a young broker on Wall Street, in a promising firm. Life would appear to be ripe for young Cabot, but he is bored. His wife gives him nothing, no love, no friendship, no sex. The boredom grows, spreads, to his office, his work. Finally he turns to raping practically every woman he sees.

The number is said to have been around 360 before he is caught. As one can imagine, he becomes the sensation of the newspapers, and privately the idol of every lonely girl. He supposedly rapes "easily and well," leaving both fear and satisfaction. He goes to prison, somewhat forgotten, but when he is released, writers everywhere decide to tell his story. They feel that "rape" will be in vogue, that "rape" will now sell. Bernie Gladhart is sent by his wife to do Cabot's story also.

Bernie goes to Brooklyn for research. He hopes to find Cabot. After a short time, he finds where Cabot lives.

He meets Cabot; he talks to Cabot, but finds that Cabot has little to say. Everything seems to have been said for him. Bernie writes a story, gathering data from the newspapers, men on the street, and Cabot himself. The strange part is Cabot can only remember committing five rapes, which leaves 355 unaccounted for. Cabot explains the loss in that he has read so much about himself, he knows not fact from fiction:

> "You see for nearly a year I read nothing but stories about myself. In newspapers, magazines, foreign and domestic--me, me, me. All the time I was in prison it was my story that was being told and retold. I read so many versions of what I did, I can safely affirm that I couldn't remember what I did and what I didn't. . . The press and TV stories were also like that, you see--everything people said, then and later, describing everything about me to a T, including those things I didn't really know about myself. For instance, this manuscript points out at the beginning that I was a suppositious child. . .nor did I know my exact wrist measurements. . .my blood count and blood type. Who didn't know these things who read the dailies?. . .If you'll excuse the detail, which I know you will because you are a writer, the size of my glans penis was testified to in court and got into print, but the extenuating fact is that I never saw the Brooklyn housewife who described it, and certainly never assaulted her, even in the dark."[3]

Yet, Cabot Wright was what he had been testified to be. He can be nothing else. He knows nothing now except what he has been told. Society has made Cabot Wright the world's most famous rapist. He does not rebel though; he tries to help all the writers. One writer asks why he helped, why he tried to give them truth, when they would only

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[3]James Purdy, Cabot Wright Begins (New York: Avon Books, 1964), pp. 101-02.

turn the truth to fiction. He answered:

> "What will I get out of it?. . .Well, let's say I might get my own story straight. . .
> I think I'd be cured. . .Cured of being what everybody made me, I guess I'd say, so I can go on and be somebody else. . .Because I was never really the man I read about in the papers. That is, I suppose, I was never really Cabot Wright."[4]

There is the quest found in the novel. He was Cabot Wright, yet he was not Cabot Wright, at least not the Cabot Wright others saw, and yet he could not become anything different. Society had made him something he was not, yet he must be because that is how they saw him. What he wanted, what he was, did not matter; these were not seen by society.

In these two novels then, The Nephew and Cabot Wright Begins. one finds the subject's identity being given by someone other than himself. Cliff's and Cabot's individual identities are different from those of society's, and yet they can only be shown as being their public identities; the public identities are all there is for the public to view. The result is that identity given by others is an identity which misleads or is a false identity, leaving only uncertainty as to the subject's real identity. The uncertainty is present in the public mind as well as the individual mind.

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[4]Ibid., p. 104.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

The introduction to this paper began by stressing the emphasis which has been placed on the concept of identity in recent times. The discussion which followed showed such emphasis as presented by James Purdy in his writings. Curiously enough, Purdy presented identity as a quest, as a quest from two points of view. One is a quest by an individual for an identity, for a self he can accept and relate with to other individuals in his world. The other is a quest of others (the public) for the identity of someone they have interacted with or who has affected their lives in some way.

The novels Malcolm, Eustace Chisholm and the Works and Jeremy's Version all present the individual quest for identity. In each novel there are characters who are searching, who are trying to fulfill themselves. The simpliest and most obvious examples are found in Malcolm.

In Malcolm the characters Malcolm, Kermit, Madame Girard and Girard Girard are each trying to establish, develop, find an identity. Malcolm begins the novel by describing himself as a "blank and a cypher," but by the end he is able to leave behind (after his death) a 300 word manuscript he has written about his life. What came between, what filled the manuscript, were "addresses," meetings with people,

interaction. Interaction is what enabled Malcolm to become more than a name. Malcolm's interaction was with characters like Kermit and the Girards. Malcolm's identity was not the only identity being developed through this interacting. Kermit's identity developed. The Girard's identity developed. At first Madame Girard grew to recognize her dependence (as far as identity is concerned) on Girard Girard, but at last she realized that she was more than dependent on him, that she was a person herself.

In Eustace Chisholm and the Works, this same process of interaction takes place, but more negatively or unhappily. Amos and Daniel meet; they are never able to forget each other again. They are dependent on each other the rest of their lives, even though they are separated. Every significant action is caused by a reaction to the other. The sad part is that neither wants to be what he is, a homosexual, neither wants to love the other, so their lives become living hell, yet neither can do anything to alter the situation. Thus, in Eustace Chisholm and the Works, interaction identifies Daniel and Amos, but does not make them what they want to be. Individual freedom then seems to come into question as an element in finding a satisfactory identity.

Jeremy's Version, Purdy's latest and most complex work, seems to combine the need of interaction one finds in Malcolm and the need for freedom one finds in Eustace Chisholm and the Works. From Purdy's point of view, some combination or synthesis of the two must be necessary.

Malcolm had to interact to become someone; Amos and Daniel needed a choice in the matter before they could find happiness. Each major character in Jeremy's Version is torn between having to interact, and wanting to interact, between people and freedom. Freedom is the big word in the novel, constantly appearing, constantly shocking the reader with the tension freedom causes. Rick loves his mother, yet because of her he cannot become what he wants to become. Jethro loves his mother and father, yet freedom is not found with them. Elvira loves her sons, hates her husband, feels freedom (a divorce) will give her all. She finds the divorce does not. What appears to be the "vicious circle" becomes just that, except that each of the characters realizes that this is how things must be. The tension must be coped with. One must interact and in interacting affect and be affected, but one must also be free. One seems not to be able to move in either extreme.

The second view, the public quest, is presented in The Nephew and Cabot Wright Begins. In each of these novels, another's identity is trying to be established. Alma wants to write a memorial to her nephew who has been killed in Korea. What she remembers, what others remember, is the identity to be put in the memorial. Cabot Wright is a man convicted of 360 rapes even though Cabot "may" not have committed them.

The public quest ends in uncertainty. Alma finds that she, Professor Mannheim and Vernon all assign different identities to her nephew. What Cliff really was is not

known because Cliff is not present. Yet, one cannot deny this public view some credibility. These characters had interacted with Cliff, yet to them Cliff's identity is uncertain. Cliff's identity must be only Cliff's, then, knowable only to him.

Cabot Wright Begins gives emphasis to the point made in The Nephew. What Cabot Wright really did, who Cabot Wright really was, will never be known. Cabot Wright, himself, no longer knows fact from fiction about himself. His identity is made uncertain because of the public view, although this public view is necessary for his identity.

Confusion or complexity almost overwhelm at this point. What is left is a complex picture of identity. Identity is something which must be sought, just as Malcolm, in visiting the addresses, sought by interacting with others. In this interaction though, pain may be experienced. The individual wants to be an individual and he may not be able to become one. His interaction may become too extreme, bonds may be made which will be unbreakable, at least unbreakable without anguish. His interaction may be too weak; the want of freedom may become so great that little interaction can take place, giving or leaving one with nothing, a "blank and a cypher," a name. Mixed in with the tension of finding a synthesis between the individual and others, between freedom and interaction, is the fact that the others are searching or questing also. They are being affected as well as affecting. The uncertainty which this public creates, causes the synthesis

to be inconclusive, at least indefinable. The faith that there is a synthesis seems to lie where all faith lies: in the uncertainty. The characters in Purdy's novels had either to seek for an identity, whether they wanted to or not, or have an identity sought for them. They had no choice of refusing identity; their only choice lay in the degree they would seek or be sought, in the performance of the quest.

The ideas expressed above are best clarified by the concluding paragraphs of Jeremy's Version:

> I had flown the cage, in any case, and was free, but with nothing to feel good over having done so, and like Elvira Summerlad, stuck with the word freedom itself.
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> Still, I was relieved of the charge, and a stay with Cousin Garth, whom I had never set eyes on, couldn't be a lot worse than Boutflour.[1]

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[1]James Purdy, Jeremy's Version (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1970), p. 279.

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